



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Managers and leaders

The cattle business is an interesting business model in several veins. First of all, especially at the seedstock, cow-calf and stocker levels, the responsibility for management and leadership decision-making falls on a single person or a small group that is typically connected as family. Furthermore, the industry in total is quite complex, the operating environment is inherently risky, and independence of participants is highly valued. In summary, this is not an easy realm for decision makers.

What is the difference?

Management can be defined as the process of effective coordination of activities, resources and knowledge. By this definition, it can be successfully argued that the industry is pretty well-managed. While there is always room for improvement, most of the enterprises that comprise the beef industry have survived because management has put in place procedures, protocols and interventions that have assured reasonable productivity and business continuity.

Producers use metrics that help them measure management effectiveness — pounds weaned per cow exposed; animal performance measured individually, in groups, and tracked across time; stocking rates; forage production; breakeven costs; and the list goes on. Access to information that assists in making excellent management choices is abundant, ranging across the full lifespan of cattle as they move through the supply chain.

Access to information about reproduction, genetics, animal health, nutrition, facilities construction, beef quality assurance, animal handling and any other discipline is nearly unlimited if a producer has access to the Internet, an extension specialist or an agribusiness technical representative. Management gets our attention, time and creative effort so our success is not surprising.

What about leadership — how well-led are our businesses and industry? This is a more difficult question to answer. Few, if any, agreed-upon leadership metrics are in place; time and energy are so devoted to management (getting things done) that leadership is often relegated into the

background and only addressed in either time of crisis or when the “to-do” list gets short. In my opinion, the failure to fully address the need for sound leadership is the Achilles’ heel of the beef business model.

Leadership is key

Rick LaPlante began his career in the high-tech corporate world where he excelled coaching business leaders and guiding business units. In mid-career he chose an alternate path and began anew to build a ranching enterprise. At a recent conference, Rick addressed the dual challenges of both managing and leading a business. In the course of discussion, he shared two quotes about leadership.

“The biggest problem with leadership is the illusion that it has occurred.” — Ron Crossline

“To lead is to live dangerously because when leadership counts, when you

lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear — their daily habits, tools, loyalties and ways of thinking — with nothing more to offer than a possibility.” — Heifetz and Linsky

After pondering Rick’s presentation, my conclusion is that as well-managed as beef enterprises are today, the same cannot be said in regard to leadership. John Kotter has studied an abundance of companies and organizations in search of the commonalities of success. In so doing he has identified eight core reasons why organizations fail. Among the eight are too much complacency, failing to create a powerful guiding coalition, underestimating the power of vision, failing to communicate the vision, and neglecting to cement changes into the culture of

an organization. Measuring our own performance in these arenas is a worthwhile endeavor.

In many ways, management is an easier skill to master because it focuses on shorter-term outcomes, processes, protocols and those “in the business” skills to which many of us more easily align. Leadership, on the other hand, is messy because it deals with a more distant horizon, requires the ability to be deeply introspective, as well as more communicative. It focuses on people, and is centered on the challenge of directing change while navigating through uncertainty.

These are the “working in” the business activities that require us to put to use the power of our head and heart as opposed to the hands-on work of getting tasks completed more efficiently. Why is leadership more difficult? Because, as LaPlante points out, leadership is creation of a reality that wouldn’t exist without your intervention, and that means change.

If we want enterprises and an industry that thrive in the future, then we have to take off the blinders and have the discipline to take a long, hard look at identifying emerging opportunities and determine the best path to capturing them. Part of that evaluation is to assess our own abilities as leaders, to build a plan of action that significantly improves those skills, and to reallocate our time and energy to the hard work of leadership. Leaders must define and communicate a compelling vision, build teams with the right combination of skill and experience committed to the vision, and all the while strive to transfer the ownership of the vision to team members and the next generation.

Now is the time to build leadership capacity, to intentionally create and execute a leadership succession plan, and to double down on acquiring coaches willing to help mentor leaders as they guide their organizations.

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—Rick LaPlante